The Intermodal Expo resuscitates itself

The 17TH ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL INTERMODAL EXPO TOOK PLACE LAST MONTH IN ATLANTA. SOME MAY HAVE CONSIDERED IT A CASE OF TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE, BUT THIS SHOW MARKED A TURNING POINT FOR THE EVENT, WHICH COULD BE EVEN STRONGER IN THE FUTURE.

I think the last GREAT Expo was in 1995. Intermodal then was still a growth industry — the railroad renaissance was still in full bloom and most intermodal players were prospering. Atlanta was shining with pride and expectation; it was to be the host city of the Olympics the next year.

But just as the Olympic bloom failed to propel Atlanta into international renown, the 1995 Expo seemed never to have reached its potential again.

The following year, the Intermodal Association of North America launched a competing show in Long Beach, Calif., the byproduct of years of discontent between IANA and Expo’s parent, the Georgia Freight Bureau. The 1996 Expo was hurt both by the competition and by scheduling — the event had to be moved up to accommodate the Olympics.

Although IANA and the Georgia Freight Bureau were ultimately able to reach a five-year agreement on joint stewardship, the Expo began to suffer. The 1997 event showed the ill effects of the previous year. In 1998, the show moved to Dallas, and generally received poor reviews. Last year, the show limped back to Atlanta.

By last summer, everyone knew there were problems and dramatic action was needed. A commission, which was established to review the alternatives, arrived at its recommendations in a single meeting.

It was generally accepted that the show needed to move to a biannual format. The industry had matured and no longer needed an annual showcase. (And after some of my prior criticism of Expo, I was asked to participate, which I did.) After review and approval by the IANA and the Georgia Freight Bureau boards of directors, the Expo had a new schedule.

To go with the new agenda, a new format was developed by the Expo program committee. The theme could be called “less is more.”

The number of sessions was curtailed, and at the same time an improvement in quality was sought. Participants had requested more discussion and fewer commercial messages. To develop new topics, roundtable talks on specific issues were introduced.

What were the results? The attendance this year — measured in the traditional headcount fashion — was not as large as previous years. But then again, many past participants were simply floor walkers boosting the crowds.

Whereas in past years leadership had been notably absent, most industry leaders were visible throughout the recent show. Matt Rose, president of Burlington Northern Santa Fe, was just one of many senior executives accessible on the exhibit floor. For those attending Expo to network, the show was a success.

Attendance at the roundtable sessions varied, but people seemed to enjoy the opportunity to discuss a broad range of issues. (Many of these subjects were an experiment to expand the range of topics covered beyond the traditional agenda.)

The three plenary sessions fostered an interesting set of conversations. In the absence of prepared remarks, the panels were forced to address industry issues. The railroad and maritime panels seemed to highlight a disconnect between these two critical intermodal constituencies.

The railroads acknowledged that there were some service problems but also pointed to their success stories. The maritime participants were very concerned about accommodating trade growth. Congestion (and even gridlock) was frequently mentioned. These subjects would be an interesting jumping-off point for further industry discussions.

The battle cry, however, was the need for more effective information technology. (The emphasis is on “effective” rather than “more.” What is available must really work; Vaporware need not apply.)

The floor exhibits also reflected this change in priority. The railroads have cut back. Steamship lines and ports are basically gone. Equipment manufacturers are still there.

The real growth was in e-commerce providers. This segment of the business is experiencing the innovation and growth that the entire industry once enjoyed.

Intermodal software — the programs through which the product is produced — now appears more important than the hardware, the actual equipment.

This will pose a dilemma for the Georgia Freight Bureau. Since Expo was one of its major money-makers, the bureau now must find an alternative revenue source for off-years, such as 2001, when there will be no Expo.

Some rumors claim that the bureau would seek to run an e-commerce show next year. While interest exists for such an enterprise, there are already several other shows in this market (or “space,” as it is now called in the e-commerce world.) Furthermore, running a transportation e-commerce show would probably cannibalize possible exhibitors and attendees for the 2002 Expo.

Expo has resuscitated itself for now. Hopefully, the industry it seeks to serve can revitalize as well, and turn its gaze to a successful future.

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